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Weekender

Story by David Sygall.

Tisn't the season, but who cares

Blue Mountains folk are so impatient for Christmas they schedule it twice a year

The quaint outdoor setting on our balcony looked inviting. It was tempting to sit on a patio perched above beautiful Katoomba and survey the spectacular green bush and golden cliffs of the Jamison Valley.

If only it were not a mere 3 degrees outside.



Nevertheless, there is something very attractive about winter in the Blue Mountains. It's a chance for Sydneysiders to breathe clean air and bring out that big bulky jacket you have never had a chance to wear. It is also a chance to snuggle up, get cosy and enjoy a special ambiance. It's a time to sample good food in a warm and snug restaurant and, afterwards, sit by a log fire and sip a smooth merlot. It's a time to relax in a hot spa bath before getting wrapped up in a big thick doona and sleeping like a baby.

Many visitors come to Australia in December to experience an unusual Christmas, one with hot weather, beaches and beer. But not the Irish

In 1980, a group of Irish folk came to stay at the Mountain Heritage, a 40 odd room, 4^{1/2} star, century old guesthouse on the outskirts of Katoomba. They watched snow and sleet gently fall onto lush green grass and were reminded of home. One of them told the hotel's owner Garry Crockett, that it felt just like Christmas in Ireland, and Crockett formed an idea. His Irish father, Bill, had told him about the white Christmases back home, with frosted windows, warm fires, turkey feasts and plum puddings. Crockett decided that winter in the mountains provided the perfect opportunity for an Irish celebration of Christmas – in the month of July.

As the winter set in Crockett began placing decorations throughout the hotel, complete with a Christmas tree. He planned for weeks to re-create a sense of December, with the results proving a great attraction for the homesick Irish. The word spread and the event gathered momentum. Over nearly three decades it continued to grow and today several businesses emulate what has become known as Yulefest. But there is only one true home for the now famous event.

For 27 years the same pianist has played carols in the Mountain Heritage's dining room, where the piano is the centerpiece of a space featuring a fireplace, bar, deep cosy arm chairs, and a stunning view across the valley. He has played for the same carolers who have been turning up for 24 years. There is even a regular Santa ready to hear your wishes.

We began our stay with a magnificent massage and facial at Spa Sublime, across the road from the Mountain Heritage. With all Australian products and excellent professional service the visit was a sublime way to begin a weekend of indulgence. Soon afterwards we took the short drive to Echo Point for a peak at the Three Sisters and a walk through Katoomba's township to check out some great antiques and art shops. Later we drove to Leura, just 10 minutes away, for a fine meal. Then it was time to return to defrost in our heated, spacious room and spa bath.



The following day we relaxed before feasting at the hotel's restaurant, Jamison Views.

We tried the lamb shanks and seared salmon but I could not help but overhear the woman at the next table gush that her meal of venison pie was "*the best meal I've had for a long time.*" Suitably fortified, we passed the next day with a bush walk to the magnificent Wentworth Falls. The Mountain Heritage Hotel and Spa Retreat has a fascinating history. Originally known as "The California", it has been through many guises, including falling into disrepair in the 1970's, prior to Crockett's ownership. By 1998 the Hotel's \$6 million refurbishment was complete. With comfortable modern rooms in a traditional building – and the friendliness of Yulefest enduring year round – The Mountain Heritage is a cosy little slice of Ireland not too far from home.